“You Are What You Speak”:

Cyber Language Is Reshaping Youth Interpersonal Relationships

Picture one of your contacts sends you a funny sticker and you two leap into “chatting” in the flow of stickers, emojis and hot Internet memes in excitement. It is a ubiquitous scene that users, especially the youth who are also known as “Generation Z” ([Stiakakis &Barboutidis 2779](#Stiakakis)), often unconsciously replace the plain words with cyber language in digital communication. But can we get any closer to our friends during such “cyber language talks”? The answer is probably no. On the contrary, overusing cyber language in online interactions is unknowingly diminishing our ability to express our minds and reducing the willingness of self-disclosure, resulting in remoter relationships. Moreover, the intentional use of cyber language is also reshaping our interpersonal patterns.

As is pointed out in the title, “You are what you say”. Our linguistic habits, such as how much you depend on cyber language in digital communication, in some way determines our social network and thus defines “what we are” in the community. To help comprehend the correlation between cyber language and interpersonal relationships and to call for constructive measures, this essay will analyse the intrinsic features of cyber language and discuss its side effects that remodel our interpersonal relationships. The essay is of practical significance since the consequences of overusing cyber language are implying the estranged relationships and underlying psychological subhealth of most “Generation Z” in a fast-paced, well-digitalised modern society, which deserves more attention from the whole society.

**BACKGROUND**

Cyber language develops with the thrive of digital communication. And there are two essential traits of cyber language -- economic features like convenience, and phatic functions. Accordingly, cyber language can be divided into three types as follows.

(1) Acronyms, homophones, and other kinds of cyber language that were designed to save time typing. Besides, lax grammar and syntax rules in cyber talks also represent the same feature of convenience, briefness and celerity ([Ma Y. *et al.* 1373-75](#MaYunxia)).

(2) Phrases composed of mixed codes and specific memes. Though not so “time-saving”, such expressions are effective phatic tricks for they can alleviate strangeness and stir up sense of identity within users.

(3) Visualised expressions like kaomojis, emojis and stickers. These expressions can avoid words using and convey certain emotions simultaneously, embodying both traits.

The efficiency and utility traits render cyber language a preferable choice for users and prevalent over time.

Though people tend to use cyber language in digital communication irrespective of age, sex, and rank, the using tendencies of it vary from person to person ([Ma X. *et al.* 202](#MaXuemei)), and from situation to situation ([Li 34-35](#Li)). For example, it is reckoned that the middle-aged and aged people prefer stickers composed of colourful characters and symbols of good wishes to the perplexing or black-humoured ones, while the youngsters often do the opposite ([Chen X. 55-56](#ChenXue)), indicating difficulty for the seniors to comprehend the cyber language used by the youth. And in different situations, the frequency and types of cyber language used in chats with different people also alters accordingly for diverse purposes. Also worth mentioning is that young netizens are always the major contributors in the creation and expansion of the cyber language ([Guo T. 129](#GuoTao)), which means there are more variations in their cyber language using preferences, thus more possible gaps for mutual comprehension.

At the same time of the thrive of digital communication and cyber language, interpersonal relationships have experienced shifts in recent years. The modern human community is approaching a highly-digitalised section, where people relied on digital communication a lot and drastically cut down on real-life interactions. The prevention policies during COVID-19 epidemic even promote the digitalisation progress (Bellis *et al.* 821-22). Some subsequent impacts on interpersonal communications have emerged so far. For instance, researches point out that some college students’ interpersonal relationship problems went worse after epidemic ([Cheng](#Cheng)) while socialising difficulty is also a manifestation of college students’ mental disorder caused by COVID-19 ([Liu 34-35](#Liu)). However, few articles are focused on the possible correlation between cyber language using and interpersonal relationships, which calls for future researches.

**DISCUSSION**

As is revealed in the BACKGROUND, the features of cyber language account for the prevalence of cyber language and the youth’s diverse using tendencies of it imply its impacts on youth interpersonal relationships, which prove to be shifting with the digitalisation. So the following parts are going to analyse how cyber language reshapes youth interpersonal relationships in daily digital communication specifically.

1. **Reducing Users’ Expressing Abilities**

A baby learning speaking is likely to be affected by its surroundings and tends to imitate what they have heard. Likewise, people have a natural tendency to pack their own vocabulary with what they have just learnt from others. Inspired by Neil Postman’s assertions in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a journalism major demonstrates in her paper that network media today have an impact on public discourse ([Bian 62](#Bian)). It can be inferred that exposure to cyber language can undoubtedly affect youth’s language systems. The more we get exposed, the more likely we are to use cyber language or compose similar expressions in our own discourse.

One probable consequence of this phenomenon is that overusing already-composed cyber language, which engages no creativity, could impair one’s independent expressing capacities. Since cyber language is created and supplemented by netizens around the world in diverse contexts, we can often “consult” our cyber language glossary and easily find proper ones for our online chats instead of bothering to organise our own words. But in long run, we will gradually lose the capacity for composing original discourse. Then, apparently, when our expression heavily depends on cyber language, we will virtually lose the freedom to share our nuanced minds and feelings, let alone making deep communications with our friends.

Meanwhile, the casualness and loose grammar rules of cyber language could impact youth’s command of standardised language. Popular as it is, cyber language is only applicable to online free chats for its informality, and will lose its utility in offline communication. Conveying ideas accurately and making oneself understood in an offline talk require rigorous logic and precise words, which are, however, always ignored in cyber language. Users addicted to cyber language, whose language systems have been packed with memes, small images, and muddled syntax, might feel uncomfortable in such offline interactions. Consequently, they might avoid interacting with others in real life and have difficulty maintaining a relationship offline, which is bad for youth’s social networking.

**2 Undermining Users’ Wider Socialising and Interpersonal Communication Willingness**

As is synthesised in Chen Qiuzhu’s article, online communication is typical of its anonymity and shallowness, which allows youth netizens to take a persona as they prefer and to easily access the groups with shared interests ([Chen Q. 145](#ChenQiuzhu)). Generally, interpersonal relationships of youth appear more concentrated in dimension and shallower in content. Cyber language contributes to the situation by facilitating the establishment of small groups and by reducing the willingness of self-disclosure.

Cyber language facilitates the formation of a differential social network and might hamper the youth from expanding their social circles. For one thing, some exclusive Internet memes can act as a filter that selects and clusters individuals sharing certain interests or experiences, thus dividing one’s contacts into groups of different intimacy. For another, aside from using certain memes within a small group, users also regard cyber language as a good alternative for phatic communication to simply maintain an acquaintance with the remote contacts. Some may argue that we benefit a lot from cyber language for knowing the like-minded friends better and meanwhile having plenty of contacts in this way. But the fact is, to the contrary, our core social network is narrowed down and we discard the chances to develop stronger bonds with a wider group of contacts, resulting in closed social networks.

Additionally, cyber language makes it easier to avoid a tricky question in chats and would reduce the willingness of self-disclosure. Previous research of Zhang Jing has presented a trend of decreasing self-disclosure initiative of college students in digital communication ([1894-95](#Zhang)). How does cyber language work in this process? As cyber language carries little information but has a powerful phatic function, it can be skilfully used as a vague response and to avoid declaring personal opinions to some sensitive questions. And with the help of this “safer” strategy, youth netizens tend to express themselves less and has lower desire of self-disclosure, which widens the gap between strangers.

1. **Limiting Idea Exchange and Deeper Communication**

Apart from affecting the users’ expressing habits, cyber language itself has shortcomings as a communication medium. Cyber language is poor at conveying complicated feelings and precise viewpoints, thus degrading the quality of interpersonal communication.

On one hand, the depth of the information that can be conveyed by cyber language is limited. Since cyber language can merely carry limited information and transmit some basic, widely shared emotions, it fails to convey subtle feelings and opinions entailed in a deep communication. Some may retort that just because there are fewer deep communications between acquaintance, it doesn’t mean the relationships are weakened. Certainly, we can be “closer acquaintance” via daily small talks and can even easily get a glimpse of others’ lives through their posts online without much communication, but is it enough? In the author’s view, however, genuine friends are those who can relate to your worries and offer comfort or advice instead of those who simply cheer for your happiness. Without deep interactions of your minds, the relationship wouldn’t be a substantial one. And it has been proved that loneliness of college students is averagely higher in digital interactions than real life ones ([Guo Y. 77](#GuoYing)).

On the other hand, limited dimensions involved in cyber language confine its utility in communication. As a type of language specifically used in digital communication, cyber language involves few dimensions like characters and images. Compared with facial expressions, body languages and other lively cues in face-to-face interactions, cyber language have fewer advantages in promoting the relationship. In this sense, cyber language can be a supplement but never a replacement of natural languages and offline interactions. And that’s why we encourage youth and other people to restrict the use of cyber language and actively engage in more offline interactions and deep communication.

**CONCLUSION**

In the digital era when online communication becomes an indispensable part of the youth’s interpersonal relationship, cyber language develops and grows into a universal phenomenon. As an expression means typical of remarkable convenience in conveying basic emotions and high efficiency in phatic communication, cyber language can also add spice to digital communication. Nevertheless, overusing cyber language has negative effects on the healthy development of youth’s interpersonal relationships. Specifically, cyber language has an impact on users’ linguistic abilities and self-disclosure willing, thus hindering netizens from expressing their internal thoughts and making proactive interactions. Cyber language itself also fails in transferring subtle feelings and ideas, which are crucial to deep connection between friends. Therefore, cyber language promotes a social network that is warm and friendly superficially, but closed and isolated in essence.

The effects of cyber language on youth interpersonal relationships are related to both linguistic and psychological problems, which are important issues concerning humanity. Since adolescents and youth are building their language systems and their minds are not mature yet, intervention in their using cyber language should be considered, which requires joint efforts from educators and social platforms. Other netizens are also recommended to pay attention to their language habits and use more sincere languages in communication to strengthen the bonds with friends. All in all, it should be kept in mind that cyber language and digital communication can never take the place of the sincere real-life interactions in our interpersonal relationships. So please control your reliance on cyber language and engage more in natural communication to strengthen the bonds!

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